

Relection 09 October 2022

Year C 28th Ordinary

OT Jeremiah 29: 1,4-7

Epistle: 2 Tim 2: 8-15

Gospel: Luke 17: 11-19



Clean, or well?

As we reflect on these readings, may our words and thoughts be acceptable to you O God.

There's an abundance of soul food in these readings. Several themes speak to our situation today. As well as gratitude, our readings speak to God's loving nature, to restoring what was damaged, and to unity in faithful community.

It seems that all those themes are inter-related. With a relatively short space to reflect on that, there is much for us each to discuss or follow up later.

First though, let's acknowledge the comment in Paul's 2nd 'epistle' [letter] to Timothy: "... warn them ... that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening."

Suffice to say that tentative thoughts, offered in hope that they might be acceptable to God, are not something I will be wrangling over: we are all pilgrims on the Way and these words are just prompts to your own reflections.

In the OT reading today, we continue our steps through the book of Jeremiah. We find that, despite the disaster of capture and exile to a foreign land, God's people are encouraged to flourish where they are, and to bless the community around them.

God's loving intent is for his people to flourish even though they have lost confidence in the presence of God being among them – they understood God's presence in this world to be anchored at the Temple in Jerusalem.

By keeping faith in God's steadfast love and commitment to them, the Israelites are to maintain their community, planting the seeds of a restored knowledge that God's presence is with them; in this way, God begins to redeem their situation.

After going over this text a few times, it struck me that God's people would have engaged with the surrounding language and culture where they found themselves [Babylon], out of simple necessity.

Does observation that speak to you at all? It prompts me to think that our ability to engage with the wider society matters.

Why does it matter? Because unlike the Israelites (to whom Jeremiah wrote) we are not called to flourish primarily for our own survival.

In context, God's word through Jeremiah to the Israelites gives a particular goal: the Israelites were to preserve their own inherited language and culture, bringing good to the Babylonian society only long enough for Israel to be rescued later, when the empire fell.

However, one of the distinctive insights of Christianity is that God's love yearns to redeem all people into community with God and with each other – if we will only agree to it. And Christians are called to actively bless others.

We ourselves are here because Christians before us engaged effectively among cultures that were not their own. Part of our faithful response is seeking to live in ways that extend God's welcome to people of every language and culture; not just our own culture or sub-culture.

If our church becomes – even unintentionally – an exclusive anglo-centric club, or if we're perceived that way, we are less able to share the good news to all people. We must work to stay 'christo-centric' instead, and able to speak into our society, so that we are equipped to sow seeds of faith from God's grace that we have received.

Perhaps it is appropriate for us to be intentional about looking, sounding and being equipped to engage with an increasingly multi-cultural society.

And speaking of the good news engaging across cultures...

As we heard, ten lepers began travelling to their priests – starting the action required in order to be declared clean of their disease.

Leprosy has been described as a disease dreaded during the time of Jesus, not because it killed people but because people remained alive without any hope.

OT "leprosy" named a range of conditions that we can now tell apart, but the disease most linked with leprosy was incurable until the mid 20th century, so for what we might call 'true' lepers it was a hopeless condition to have in Jesus' day.

However, some conditions within the scope of OT 'leprosy' could heal, and the OT book of Leviticus does provide law for how a person might be declared free of leprosy and re-join the community. This process is what Jesus triggers by sending the ten to the priests.

But one of them paused to put his cleansing in a wider perspective, seeing God as the centre of the personal miracle he was experiencing. Before anything else, this one gave thanks for the chance to renew his life. He was not only cured physically, but he also gained spiritual wholeness.

And the surprise ending of this story is that the one who praises God and gives thanks for his healing is a Samaritan.

This one leper was not only isolated by illness, but further isolated by his culture and religion. He was not only physically ill, but inherently seen by Jewish culture as a social outcast and a religious heretic. He may have begun

travelling to a Samaritan priest instead of a Jewish one. But he recognises God acting in his life and responds. And Jesus spoke to highlight how this one did the right thing – placing himself in a right relationship with God.

There's no suggestion the nine were returned to disease, and no suggestion that the one didn't go through rituals and go on to live in a community... but the one showed by action that he had become well. [or whole]

So: to be clean & no longer exiled is desirable, but being rightly grateful to God is to be well –to exist in a good state. The healed leper illustrates for a moment a joyful life, in right relationship to a sense of the mysterious source of life and goodness being present with us, and acting in response.

You'll have noticed echoes here of the SHALOM we've mentioned several times in the last few weeks. Perhaps being grateful is part of how we all can live well – how we live flourishing lives in right r'ship with God and each other. Perhaps thanks-giving is a built-in part of the SHALOM that God desires for us.

But that right relationship to God or others does not require perfect bodily health. I acknowledge all those here who flourish and honour God despite diseases great or small – your witness is inspiring testimony to our faith.

So, this week as in most weeks, the whole gospel is in our readings: God's loving goodness, grace restoring the outcasts, and unity through the fruits of faith. [*a.k.a. creation, grace, fall, redemption, & resurrection to come*]

During the rest of our week, may we find ways to share a sense of our gratitude for the goodness and abundance of God. In doing so, may we experience in SHALOM – that challenging, on-going, deep flourishing of our soul within right relationships.

Shalom is the kingdom of God that is present, right now, in our grateful hearts. We are called to usher it into the world, even while knowing that it will not unfold completely until God walks with us again.

And that's why, at the end each service, we are bid to go forth; to love and serve the Lord outside this building, in our community, as our contribution to bringing God's kingdom into this world.